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OBSERVATIONS, *on the* POWER *of* PAINTING *to express*  
 MIXED PASSIONS. *By the Rev.* MICHAEL KEARNEY,  
*D. D. M. R. I. A.*

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THE discourses of the late President of the Royal Academy of Painting, &c. not only display a profound knowledge of professional theory, but also contain many general transcendental principles of all the finer arts. The student of poetry or eloquence may derive from them almost equal instruction with the painter. It is therefore with the greatest hesitation I venture to examine the justness of a decision made by so philosophical an observer of human nature.

Read Nov.  
 14, 1795.

IN the discourse delivered December 10, 1772, he cautions the young artist against aiming at the union of contradictory excellences, which must necessarily be mutually exclusive of each other. He then censures some persons *who have been fond of describing the expression of mixt passions*, which they fancied to exist in some favourite work. Such expression he pronounces to  
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be out of the reach of art, and only ascribed to such works by persons *who, not being of the profession, know not what can or cannot be done.*

WHAT Sir Joshua Reynolds declares to be beyond the reach of art it is indeed hardiness not to admit as impracticable; yet as the question does not turn on the technical skill of a painter so much as on the powers of the human countenance, it may not be improper to discuss it.

IF this opinion were admitted in its strictest sense, the painter must be pronounced incapable of exhibiting any but the merely elemental emotions, as most of the passions that affect the mind in the complicated transactions of human life are in a certain degree of a mixed nature. This however is unquestionably not the meaning of our author. It appears from the tenour of his argument that many affections in which a philosophical analysis discovers a composition were considered by him as simple, and that he confines his observation to such passions as are in a popular sense called mixed.

I MUST first take notice, that the examples of false judgment drawn by the President from Pliny, relate to fixed, habitual, characteristical qualities, not to passions occasionally exerted.

YET without recurring to the powers supposed to be inherent in the human face by a modern fanciful physiognomist, may not  
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the habitual temper, and even the blended ingredients that form it, be discerned often in the aspect? Pliny describes the statue of Paris by Euphranor, which represents him as *judex dearum*, amator *Helenæ*, & interfector *Achillis*. This instance from sculpture is censured by the President; and yet why may not a dignified form and an expressed character of martial gallantry be united with the marks of an amorous temperament?

THE characteristic portrait of the *Demos Atheniensis*, mentioned by Pliny, and said to be allegorically painted by Parrhasius, is indeed a moral monster, formed of qualities utterly incompatible. *Volebat namque varium, iracundum, injustum, inconstantem; eundem exorabilem, clementem, misericordem, excelsum, gloriosum, humilem, ferocem, fugacemque & omnia pariter ostendere.* Such a picture is beyond the reach of art; and it is as impracticable for painting to delineate such an assemblage of contradictions as for the imagination to embody the mutually exclusive qualities brought together in Lock's description of the abstract idea of a triangle; or for the soul of Cardan to have cemented into one mass the warring vitious passions with which, in the visions of his distempered fancy, he seemed polluted.

BUT to come near to the question: Can it be doubted that every indication of inward emotion which the countenance is capable of assuming the pencil of the painter may imitate on the canvas? If the original displays a sensible conflict of passions why must the power of the imitative art be limited to an *indistinct and imperfect marking*?

IF then the above maxim be incontrovertible, as I think it is, we have only to enquire whether in fact the countenance ever expresses a mixture of emotions? While the soul is affected by any passion, if it be assailed by another of a different or discordant nature, the former will either give way or contend for predominance. In the first case there will be a moment of fluctuation, during which the expression will be uncertain; that of the former not being totally effaced, nor the other yet exclusively ascendant. Thus the lover in Lucretius viewing his mistress *in vultu videt vestigia risus*. This transient interval resembles those points of time so happily seized by Ovid in the Metamorphoses before the entire recess of the first form or consummation of the new one. Though the painter's art, confined to a single instant, could not delineate the rapid train of passions, *which dimm'd the face* of Satan on the view of Eden, and *thrice chang'd with pale ire, envy and despair*, yet were he even to select the moment, *when his griev'd look he fixed sad*, still it must be Satanic sadness, tinged with *deep malice and revenge*. I could almost conceive, that as the sculptor in the station of a statue can imply its being in actual motion, so the magick of the painter can suggest to us how transient the emotion expressed is intended to be.—If the first impressed passion be firm enough to contend for superiority with that superinduced, does not experience prove that the features wear a form very different from that which either passion single would produce? Does not the expression participate of the character of each? Is there no difference, but in degree, between the aspect of a man  
oppressed

oppressed by fear, and of one disturbed by complexional timidity, yet supported against its influence by rational self-discipline? The countenance of Coriolanus during the supplication of his mother and wife must have passed through a series of expressions from that of an assumed cold stateliness, with which he covered his feelings, till when overpowered by natural affection *his eyes did sweat compassion*. Through the whole of this conflict at no time did his countenance indicate an unmixed emotion, and even at the concluding triumph of filial duty, the great interpreter of nature hath represented him distracted almost to agony:

Oh, my mother, mother! oh!  
 You have won a happy victory to Rome:  
 But for your son—*Believe* it, oh, *believe* it—  
 Most dangerously with him you have prevail'd,  
 If not most mortal to him. But let it come.

ANDROMACHE δακρύεν γελασάσα (6 Iliad, 484) readily occurs as a beautiful illustration of the power of the countenance to express blended feelings; it does not however appear to me to come so near the essence of the question as to be competent to support the decision of it. A variety of soft images rushed at once on the mind of Andromache; her heart was melted with a recollection of the many tender circumstances that form the aggregate of domestic happiness; and Hector's perilous station excited a fear of losing him who supported this happiness; the little incident of infant terror quickened this mass of tenderness; yet these emotions, being of a kindred nature, easily coalesce into

one united charity. We have here a combination of concurring, not the perplexity of contending passions. Mingled tears and smiles are often marks of the affectionate feeling, though on most occasions they denote contrary passions. A more applicable instance may be found in the *Odyssy*, (19 *Odyf.* 471.) where the great poet describes, with exquisite force and truth of colouring, the effect which the sudden recognition of her old master produced in his nurse Eurycleia.

Τὴν δ' ἄμα χάρμα καὶ ἄλγος ἔλε φρένα. τῷ δὲ οἱ ὅσσε  
Δακρυόφιν πλήθεν. θαλερῇ δέ οἱ ἐσχετο φωνή.

THE celebrated picture by Timomachus, in which Medea is represented meditating the murder of her children, has often with propriety been quoted as exhibiting a situation in which a conflict of passions must have arisen :

*Ira fubeſt lachrymis ; miſeratio nec caret irâ.*

And it may be here obſerved, that this expreſſion of rage, controuled by ſofter feelings, muſt be more impreſſive and affecting than that of the frenzy which would diſtort the aſpect of Medea in the act of infanticide ; and which, becauſe incapable of being heightened, would leave no room to the productive power of imagination, which it is the office of painting rather to excite than to ſaturate. Perhaps above all others the following is the moſt appoſite inſtance : Junius Brutus is graphically deſcribed by Livy as preſiding at the capital puniſhment of his ſons, whom  
he

he had condemned to die; & *qui spectator erat amovendus, eum ipsum fortuna exactorem supplicii dedit - - - - quum inter omne tempus pater, vultus & os ejus spectaculo esset.*

BUT what appearance in the countenance of Brutus so strongly interested the attention of the beholders? They surely saw something more than the expression of a father's heart wounded by the sufferings of his sons. They traced a severe internal conflict; they observed visibly charactered in his face and gesture the vigorous but ineffectual efforts of nature to burst the restraints with which stern republican justice had fettered her yearnings: *Eminente patrio animo inter publicæ pænæ ministerium.*